

“emotional truth” of what it felt like to be a nineteenth-century voodoo queen in New Orleans, what it felt like to be swept up in the violence of the Tulsa race riot of 1921, what it felt like to be the white mistress and black wife of the great abolitionist and ex-slave Frederick Douglass. All my fictions have “me” inside them, but none of my fiction has ever been able to capture the facts, details, and emotional truth of my childhood. My first novel, *Family Lies*, was my creative dissertation at Carnegie Mellon University, written in 1979. This novel is essentially about my childhood and family. It is bleak and, essentially, a failed fiction.

It's taken me more than twenty years to begin mining my childhood memories again, and only through creative nonfiction have I gained a measure of satisfaction. Somehow the announcement of these memories as “truth,” as nonfiction, liberates me in ways no fiction ever has. Yet I'm fully aware that my creative nonfiction is distorted by the fictional lies of memory and perception.

Trying to write about myself and my family within the context of plot didn't reveal the myriad layers of meaning in my life. Creative nonfiction, on the other hand, allows me to scratch at emotional sores with depth, passion, and, I think, with a full awareness that I'm still searching to understand my life and the interconnections between my grandmother, my mother, myself, and my children, and my children's children-to-be.

“Mixed-Blood Stew” wasn't easy writing; nonetheless, the process was deeply satisfying. It means something when the hurt child can put herself front and center inside the tale, and through memory, the passage of time, weave a bit of healing. Maybe that's why this particular creative nonfiction is so satisfying to me—it means I've survived. It signifies hope. I belong in the world and the world is alive—inside me.

Why I Ride

JANA RICHMAN

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The fear begins to subside as soon as I'm out of town. The speed of the open road should cause greater fear, but the whirl of the engine lulls me into a false sense of safety. A slight vibration from the foot pegs seeps into my toes, travels though my legs and around the curve of my butt, settling in my lower back. I squeeze the grips to send another tremble through my hands and into my elbows to dwell in my chest and shoulders. The unseasonably cool Arizona summer morning air slips up my sleeves and twirls inside my zipped jacket. I pop up my face shield, take the blast full on my face; sunglasses flutter with the force. The wind enters at my temples, roars past my ears, and exits at my neck. The pavement slides under me, and I'm stunned, always, to see it so close. My brain tells me it is rough and hard, but in my eyes, it shimmers and glides. The weeds on the side of the road beckon me to reach out and brush my hand over their fluffy tops. I resist.

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I am strikingly aware of even the slightest change in temperature. And here at this point, all intuitively begins to make sense—here, where wind, steel, flesh, asphalt, rubber, blood, speed, bone, plastic, and muscle coalesce. Here I might begin to understand my motives. But a rabbit hops across the road, and I hit my brakes with a little too much force, causing the back tire to skid just a tiny bit. In that moment the illusion shatters; the elements separate.

I didn't grow up dreaming of speed and power. I didn't collect miniature models of motorcycles and didn't have a crush on a James Dean-type rebel roaring slowly by on his Harley-Davidson. A hip father didn't tote me to school on the back of a spit-polished classic Triumph—in fact quite the opposite. Whenever my father began to guide his Oldsmobile into a parking space only to find it occupied by a motorcycle, his words were something like, "Those goddamned ridiculous contraptions ought to be outlawed." But while my father's outright disdain worked at me from one angle, something much more surreptitious worked at me from another.

I enter the curves north of Winkleman on Highway 77 and hit the throttle to blow off any lingering shreds of trepidation. The road climbs through steep rock walls bearing the jagged red scars of dynamite blasts on their slate-gray interiors. I crave a glimpse of the murky green waters of the Gila River, which I know to be in the grassy gorge below, but I dare not look long enough to locate it. I keep my eyes up, turn my head to look as far as I can through the first curve, tip my bike so it rests on the left side of its tires, and roll on the throttle.

Trust your tires. Words spoken by Will, my husband, when he caught me kicking my tires as the bike stood in the driveway. Trust my tires? Place my trust in strips of grooved rubber wrapped around a thin steel belt strapped to aluminum alloy? Francis Scott Key thought we might place our trust in God; Francis Bacon put his trust in old friends; Goethe suggested that we trust ourselves. I can't recall anyone who trusted tires. But leaning into a curve at 65 mph, supported only by physics and a pavement/rubber-contact width of about two inches, it is no time to contemplate the trustworthiness of tires. I trust Will, so upon his words, I put my faith in my tires.

The bike slowly straightens as I come out of the first curve and begins to lean to the opposite side as I enter the next. I no longer see shades of green and beige along the road. Everything is black and white. *Get your motor runnin'. Get out on the highway. Lookin' for adventure. And whatever comes my way. Booooo to be wiillld.* My horrendous singing voice reverberates in my helmet.

Look. Lean. Roll. The simple instructions for riding through a curve repeat themselves in my head. But halfway through the fourth turn, something feels wrong. I've lost focus, or I've hit the curve hot—my entry line too tight. Hitting the brakes while leaning over would take me down. More lean would pull me back into the curve, but I don't have the stomach for it. I roll off the throttle, cross the double yellow, and end up halfway into the opposite lane before I slow enough to pull it back to the right. Had a car been coming in the opposite direction, the driver would not have seen me in time to stop. Had I been in a left-hand curve, I would have wiped out on the right shoulder. A stupid mistake, a lucky outcome. My knees quiver against the tank, but I keep riding, knowing that if I get off the bike, it will be hard to get back on.

I am going to Utah to attend the Hatch family reunion—the reunion of my mother, her seven brothers and sisters, my thirty-two cousins and their two hundred and forty offspring—which I have attended every year for the past ten years. The Hatches have held the reunion every year for at least forty years, but its importance in my life has only recently become apparent.

I was born Jana Richman but never felt like a Richman, a family ruled by amplification. Whoever yells loudest—usually obscenities—is in charge. I like to think of myself as a Hatch, a family of strong but gentle men and quietly independent women.

I don't always understand the independence of the Hatch women and, for a very long time, did not recognize it at all. At first glance they are typical Mormon women accepting the role the church outlines for them: subordination. Each of them married in the L.D.S. Temple and took on the role of wife and mother with gusto, as if there were no other option.

Aunt Agatha, the oldest, used to take my sister and me to her dairy farm in Cove, Utah, every summer. I roamed the vast woods and fields, free to eat raspberries off the bushes growing around the farmhouse, while she baked bread and pies, made her own ice cream, and bottled peaches. She was the perfect aunt, the perfect mother, and the perfect Mormon housewife. Ten years ago when her husband had a stroke, people expected her to fall apart. She did not. She washed and fed him every day until he died two years later. Shortly thereafter, when someone mentioned that she might want to remarry, she said no, she no longer chose to take care of others. Instead she sold the farm and at age eighty embarked on a mission for the Mormon Church.

Right around that time, I realized the possibility that my mother and my aunts were in fact making choices. Until then I had assumed that the Mormon Church was dictating the facts of their lives, that they were simply too weak to extricate

themselves from a Mormon legacy that runs deeper than the Great Salt Lake.

Their great-great-grandfather, Ira Sterns Hatch, was in Nauvoo, Illinois, with Mormon prophet Joseph Smith when Smith was assassinated. His son, their great-grandfather, Orin Hatch, helped settle the Salt Lake Valley with Brigham Young. When Young asked Hatch to help settle Carson Valley, Nevada, Hatch's young wife, Elizabeth, refused to budge. Young suggested that Hatch take a second wife for the job, and with the blessing of Elizabeth, he chose Maria Thompson, a sturdy eighteen-year-old, my great-great-grandmother. When Orin and Maria returned to Utah, Orin moved back home with Elizabeth while Maria lived with her father and raised her eight children. Maria was a leader in the Relief Society, the women's organization of the Mormon Church; she was also a leader in the suffragette movement in Bountiful, Utah.

I head for the Texaco on the south side of Globe because Will and I have stopped there more than a dozen times on previous rides. I want the familiarity. Years of riding experience allow Will to scan a parking lot in the few seconds it takes him to drive in, register the layout, and maneuver accordingly. I'm not so astute. If I pull forward into a parking place that appears to be level but in fact has a slight forward slope, I'm rendered helpless. Ready to ride, my bike weighs 517 pounds. Add to that 90 pounds of saddlebags, tank bag, and duffel bag, and you get this picture: a 115-pound woman straddling a 600-pound machine attempting to push it backward up a tiny hill with only the use of her two skinny legs.

Parking lots present more than just slope problems. Making U-turns on a motorcycle requires a unique mix of enough speed to

keep the bike upright and enough lean to get the bike turned. A skilled rider can make a U-turn easily in the space of a single traffic lane. I can make a U-turn not so easily in the space of three traffic lanes. I'm told that my particular bike has excellent "rake and trail." In engineering terms that means nothing to me, but in riding terms it means it is the perfect bike to make tight U-turns, which should make me feel better but does not. My instincts are wrong when it comes to U-turns. If Will gets into trouble and the bike begins to tip, he instinctively hits the throttle, which pulls him upright and out of trouble. I instinctively hit the brakes, and my bike and I both end up horizontal on the pavement.

When I was growing up, my father considered reading and writing to be a waste of time when there was "real work" to be done. Get off your ass and do something, for Christ's sake! When I heard my father stomping down the hallway toward my closed bedroom door, intent on catching me in petty pursuits, I jumped up, shoved my book under the bed, and busied myself with dusting the dresser. At times my mother quietly intervened. Sometimes the footsteps retreated; other times I cowered behind the closed door, listening to the venom she received on my behalf.

Because I like my mother better than my father, I've always attributed everything good about me to her and blamed everything bad about me on him—a simple system that has served me well for more than thirty years but is beginning to fall apart. I realize now, much to my consternation, that my father taught me to dream and, even more, to follow those dreams. Lord knows he didn't do it on purpose. He stressed practicality. He talked me into going to business school and becoming a CPA. But while I studied balance sheets, he vigorously chased his dream of being a cowboy like his father and his grandfather.

When I was ten years old, my father mortgaged everything he owned to buy a rundown ranch with fifty head of scraggly Hereford cows and one bull, putting our family into a financial spiral. But he dressed up in a cowboy hat and boots, bought himself a horse, a truck and trailer, and saddled up. Twenty-two years later, his daughter quit her high-paying Wall Street job, moved to the desert to write, and bought a motorcycle. He thought she had lost her mind.

That wasn't the first time. He also thought I was crazy when I left Utah for New York three years earlier, intent on landing that Wall Street job. He never thought a Western girl, a rancher's daughter to boot, had a chance in hell of surviving there. Once he found out how much money I made, however, he became a proud father. But he was right about one thing—a Western girl can't survive in Manhattan. At least this one can't. It's not the break-neck pace or the cutthroat business dealings—I adjusted to that stuff. And I didn't see much difference between herding fifty cows through a three-foot wide gate and shoving my way through an open subway door during rush hour. It's the lack of dirt that got to me. I mean real dirt—not the kind that comes off commuters' shoes or the tires of a bus—the kind you can dig into for a foot or two and find nothing but more dirt. And it's the lack of mountains that soar from earth to sky so splendidly as to remind me that the activities of Wall Street are only a game with winners and losers. I need reminders in my life. A year after I married Will, a New Jersey native, I brought him home to the West.

The dazzling blue water of Roosevelt Lake on my right undulates in absolute dissonance with its barren desert shores, each gently pushing the other to gain just a little more ground. Will and I have ridden this road dozens of times, but the unrelenting

heat along this stretch always ambushes me. I expect the body of water that's next to me for more than twenty minutes to cool the air, but it is no match for the ruthless Arizona sun. I unzip my jacket, looking for a little relief, but find none. I could remove it altogether, but a leather jacket works like health insurance—you only need it when you don't have it. The idea of making contact with pavement that can peel layers of skin down to the bone is unappealing in any case but more so without my leather insurance policy. The dozens of gnats splattered directly in front of my eyes tell me that popping the face shield for extra airflow might not be wise, either. So I sweat.

Less than two hours out on a six-hour first-day ride, my body begins to ache. I take my feet off the pegs one at a time, straighten my legs, and shake the kinks out of my knees. They scream at me for doing this, shooting jolts of pain to my brain in an attempt to remind me of my age. *Yeah, yeah*, I tell them. I remind them about Mary, a seventy-eight-year-old woman I met two years ago in Flagstaff. I remind them that she walked with a cane and had to have someone help her on and off her motorcycle, but she had just ridden several hundred miles, solo, from New Mexico, leaning into a windstorm. I inform them that I will be doing the same when I am seventy-eight and they should toughen up and stop complaining. After several miles of this, I realize I am talking to my knees out loud, my voice echoing in my helmet.

I shake out both hands, which have started to cramp. Beneath my gloves my hands are beginning to look like my mother's. Her hands look like those of her sisters, whose hands look like those of their mother. It is the arthritic claw of Ethel Gooch Hatch, my grandmother. My mother gave her Hatch hand in marriage to my father forty-nine years ago in the Logan, Utah, L.D.S. Temple. Soon after the wedding, my father aban-

doned the church and forbade my mother to wear her temple garments (the underclothes worn by members of the Mormon Church who have gone through a temple ceremony) because he did not find them sexy. He stopped short of forbidding her attendance at church, but he ridiculed her and hindered her from taking on church responsibilities that might interfere with her duties as a wife. My mother was torn in half, loving the church more than she loved her husband, at the same time trying to follow church doctrine that taught her to worship him and respect his wishes. She sought guidance from her sisters, who, operating under the same principles, encouraged her to stand by him, believing always that God would guide my father back to the church.

Thirty-six years later, when God still hadn't intervened, my mother donned her temple garments, walked past my father on her way to church, and threatened to leave him if he stood in her way. Most of her life now revolves around church activity and commitments. She feels liberated and fulfilled. I asked her once if she didn't see the irony in finding liberation in an organization that grants men master status among women, in finding fulfillment as a woman in an institution that sees priesthood as the highest honor possible—an honor never to be bestowed upon a woman. I asked her if she didn't see the irony in finding freedom in an organization whose doctrine kept her in a difficult marriage for almost fifty years. Yes, she supposed there was a bit of irony there, and she laughed softly. But my mother shines in her work with the Relief Society. I have seen her organize twenty women into a legion of caretakers, chefs, chauffeurs, financiers, and diplomats when tragedy strikes a local family. I have seen her drive forty miles through a blizzard to get to the Salt Lake City Temple to do church work. I have seen her share a meal with a reclusive woman who won't let anyone else walk through her

front door. Since my mother's return to the church, I have seen her face change; I have seen lines fall away and return in exquisite softness. I have seen her at peace.

I don't know the source of her peace—the church or the reclamation of a life. But watching the 'Hatch women, I am beginning to understand that there might be as many roads to fulfillment and freedom as there are women to take them.

I called Mom the day before I left and told her not to expect me for another three days. "I'm taking the bike, and I don't want to push it."

"You're not going to camp, are you?"

"No. I don't want to pack a tent and a bag."

"Where will you stop?"

"Flagstaff the first night, Panguitch the second. I'll be there early afternoon on Saturday."

"You'll call me every night?"

"Sure. Don't worry; I'll be careful."

"I know. I love you."

"See you Saturday."

I wanted to say something to alleviate her fear but had nothing to offer. My mother is one of a handful of people who have not asked me why I ride a motorcycle. Although Will has been riding for more than twenty years, he seldom hears this question. Surprisingly, the admonishments usually come from my own gender. Those who ask point out the obvious dangers, as if they were an oversight on my part, and once I recognized them, I'd come to my senses. I curse every person—and they number in the dozens—who, on learning I ride a motorcycle, is compelled to tell me about a cousin who was killed on a bike, a friend who is now in a wheelchair because of a motorcycle accident, or a

brother who now maintains vegetable status. *I would never ride a motorcycle*, they say with a certain wisdom I obviously lack. Everyone within hearing distance nods knowingly in agreement. I'm thankful Mom does not ask because I have no ready answer. But I get the feeling she doesn't ask because she already knows.

I walk out of the hotel in Flagstaff at 7 a.m. and find my motorcycle resting on its side. Voices rush into my head. *That bike's too big for you. You shouldn't ride a bike if you can't pick it up when it falls.* That's always been the big question: Could I pick the bike up if I had to? I've never been tested on this. I've dropped a bike, but Will was there to pick it up for me. My bags fall from my hands, and I sit down next to them and stare at the bike. My heart pumps more rapidly than usual, and sweat beads emerge on my forearms inside my leather jacket. I tell myself this is an irrational thing to panic over—no danger involved, nothing really at stake. I stand, take hold of the grip closest to the ground with one hand and reach just beneath the seat with the other, bend my knees and prepare to lift with my legs. The muscles in my arms and legs engage in one unified movement. The bike doesn't budge.

"Want some help?" The voice comes from behind me—a young man watering petunias in pots with a hose.

"Yes," I say. "I want help."

"It's a big bike," he says as he lifts it without my assistance and rests it on its side stand.

"Yes, I know."

I ride a BMW R1100R. Someone once told me it looks like a pregnant guppy. The 5.5-gallon fuel tank puffs out into a pregnant stomach, and down below the cylinder heads stick out on either side like fins. It has a top speed of 133 mph and a 0-to-60

acceleration time of 3.98 seconds. But none of that is the reason I ride this particular bike. I ride it because it has horizontally opposing pistons and a Telelever front end. In my language, that means the bike will forgive a novice rider; it will hug even the roughest road—bumps and ruts and railroad tracks—and it will minimize “diving” when the rider on its back pounces too strongly on the front brake. My bike has a low center of gravity and an adjustable seat that allows me to put both feet flat on the ground when I come to a stop. In spite of its size, it is a popular bike among women riders.

This is not my first solo motorcycle trip. Last summer I rode the bike to a monastery in northern New Mexico. Everything about that trip felt right; I never questioned it. I headed north out of Tucson, then east on Highway 70 across the San Carlos Apache Indian Reservation because I wanted to spend the first evening soaking in a mineral bath in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. It was a straight shot from San Carlos to Safford—the kind of curveless empty road that real motorcyclists hate. I twisted my cruise-control knob, set the needle right at 90 mph, spread my face into a smile, and watched the miles fly by. I didn't think about the animals that might dart in front of me, the cars that might pull out, the rough road surface that might suddenly appear. Pondering any of these things at any speed is a foolish game. It makes me shudder, makes my hands shake, makes me incapable of riding.

Critic Robert Hughes wrote of the Guggenheim motorcycle show, “Bikes mean a lot of things, but the main one is raw, unprotected speed, and there is little point of owning one unless you are prepared to go somewhat out on the edge.” I never drive my car at speeds of 90 mph or more. On a bike, though, the edge

is so close, so enticing, unencumbered by airbags and seat belts and headrests. I suppose most would liken riding to flying, but to me it is more like floating, faceup, spread-eagle in the middle of the ocean, with your ears submerged. You feel vulnerable because the water is more powerful than you, and your senses have been dulled. But you can hear your own breathing and your own heartbeat, and that is worth the risk.

I arrived at the monastery with a two-inch band burned around each of my wrists. Exposed to seven hours of desert sun, the skin between my gloves and my shirtsleeves blistered and peeled, and the markings stayed with me for months. When I explained how they got there, a woman sitting next to me reached over, placed her cool hand around my hot wrist, and squeezed gently, with tears in her eyes. She told me later it had taken every bit of courage she could muster to drive 180 miles to the monastery by herself.

The mesas of the Navajo reservation north of Flagstaff playfully run alongside me, their eroded shapes changing colors from lavender to burnt orange and back again as the clouds move about the sky and cast their shadows. But the 8 a.m. sun is already hot, and after eighty miles or so of straight road, with no relief in sight, the mesas begin to mock me: *It doesn't matter how fast you ride; nothing will change; you aren't going anywhere.*

The land below the mesas looks as if an enormous dump truck came through centuries ago, leaving hump after hump of gray dirt. Grass has tried to grow on some of them and has succeeded in a few cases. From time to time, the gray earth blends with red that flows from the mesas, as if an irrigation head gate has been opened. I scan the mounds, looking for an old sheepherder on a horse, anything to take my attention from counting

the mile-marker posts. Chief Yellow Horse advertises Navajo jewelry, blankets, and phone cards—one-stop shopping. As I pass the shockingly yellow roadside stand, a sign tells me: TURN AROUND. NICE INDIANS BEHIND YOU! Each rickety booth along the road glitters with silver laid out on a white sheet, and I tell myself the same thing every time I take this road: *One of these days I'm going to stop and do some shopping.* A passing motorcyclist waves to me, and I wave back.

I let out a little yelp for joy at the 89A turnoff, a hundred miles out of Flagstaff, which will soon take me into the shadows of the imposing Vermilion Cliffs—where I will quickly come to feel like a flea on the underbelly of a Clydesdale—then into Kaibab National Forest, with a promise of pine aroma and dappled, shady roads.

Once I thought I saw you in a crowded, hazy bar/Dancing on the light from star to star/Far across the moonbeams, I know that's who you are/I saw your brown eyes turning once to fire. I have decided unequivocally that any Neil Young song has the perfect tone to sing inside my helmet, but the words come most easily to this one. As I round the first curve, happy to have a curve after a hundred miles of straight road, I launch into the chorus in my loudest Neil Young, nasal whine: *You are like a hurricane/There's calm in your eyes/And I'm getting blown away . . . to someplace safer where the feeling stays/I want to love you but I get so blown away.* A large bug whacks my helmet with the force of a small projectile and puts an end to my singing.

The jagged mesas travel with me until I rumble over the Colorado River on the Navajo Bridge. The narrow two-lane road stretches into an elongated V in front of me. To my left: acres of barbed-wire-enclosed crusty yellow fields cut into irregular pieces by deep, red gullies. I search for grazing cattle, for life of any kind. Nothing. To my right: looming formations of rounded rock the

brownish red color of dried blood. The rocks look as if they were purposefully arranged by giant prehistoric people with magnificent tawny bodies of muscle and stature. I am completely alone, riding on an uninhabited planet. I have no one expecting me, no place to go. I am possibly the only human alive at this moment. I find peace here. I ride only to ride.

I spent most of my childhood shrinking in fear and lying low in corners, avoiding the Richman men. I remember the first time I said I wanted to be a writer; I must have been about nine. My father was in the mood to mold a personality, and this particular day he picked me. We—my mother, father, brother, and sister—were driving to Paradise, Utah, for a picnic. It was the town of my father's youth, a two-and-a-half hour drive each way from where we lived.

"So, Jana," he said, "what do you want to be?"

I knew, even at that age, it was a setup, but I must have been feeling courageous.

"A writer," I replied.

I vividly remember the top of his hairless head when he threw it back to laugh.

"You're being silly. What will you write?"

I didn't reply. He reached behind the seat and gripped my leg just above my ankle.

"What will you write?"

"Nothing."

I gas up at Jacob's Lake in Kaibab National Forest near the north rim of the Grand Canyon, take a break, and chat for a bit with two gnarly Harley dudes—bandannas, chains, oil-stained

fingers and hair. Five years ago I would have walked a circle around them to get into the lodge; now I feel an instant camaraderie, an unspoken understanding.

"Which way ya headed?" one of them asks me as he adjusts the bandanna on his head.

"North," I say. "How about you guys?"

"We're going down to Flag."

"How do you like your boxer?" the other one asks me.

"I love it."

"Yeah, they're good bikes. I used to have an R69."

We chat for a while longer and part.

"Have a good trip," one says.

"Thanks."

"Keep the shiny side up," says the other.

"Yeah, you too."

Just north of Fredonia, I spot the WELCOME TO UTAH sign. Though I still have 450 or so miles to go before I reach home, I feel immediately among friends and family, as if I could stop at any house now along the way and they would invite me in to supper, as if they were damn glad to see me. Every muscle—from my little toe to one solid strip of pain running up my back and into my head—aches. I want to stop at the nearest house and test my theory, but I ride on.

In Kanab, I meet up again with Highway 89. The red rock turns to yellow as I enter the rolling green valleys north of the Zion National Park turnoff. I slow down, let hurried travelers pass me, and open my face shield to get the full impact of the beauty surrounding me. This stretch of road—no matter how many times I drive it—stuns me with its subtle magnificence. I daydream about a little house here tucked carefully into the hills, surrounded by murmurs of creeks cutting their paths through green pastures, flashes of pink summer roses, smells of lilac drift-

ing through the air, and quiet—so much quiet that you could hear a cat stroll through tall grass. I pass through the familiar little towns of Mount Carmel, Orderville, and Hatch, a town settled by the brother of my great-great-grandfather, where my mind insists on making life simple and happy.

My daydreams carry me to Panguitch, where I pull into the empty lot of the motel and begin the methodical process of de-kinking every joint in my body while removing gloves, glasses, helmet, and jacket. I shake out my hair (which insists on clinging to my head as if frightened to let go) and glance in my rearview mirror. I look worse than roadkill. The front desk is unattended, but I hear a television in the back. "Hello?" I call out. A short nondescript woman shuffles out and smiles to greet me. I place my helmet on the desk to free my hands. She takes a look at it, then at my bug-splattered jacket, then glances out the window at the bike, the only vehicle in the lot. "We're full up," she tells me. I smile smugly. I tell her I have a reservation.

I love riding—I love the feel of hot wind colliding with my body. I love the smell of wildflowers, pine trees, diesel fuel, and sagebrush rushing at me, one after another. I love the clarity of colors that have not been dimmed through a plate-glass window—like the place where a faultless blue sky touches a bronze earth with such crystallinity that I'm certain of reaching that spot before sundown. And I love speed.

I am not a classic thrill-seeker. I have not been bungee jumping, skydiving, rock climbing, or helicopter skiing. Motorcycling is not a passing fancy until the next bigger and riskier thrill comes along. And I don't have a death wish.

Will owned a motorcycle when I met him, and occasionally I went for a ride with him. Nothing about those rides on the

backseat engaged me. But he was passionate about bikes, and I was passionate about him, so I kept trying. At a roadside stand, we once struck up a conversation with a couple in their seventies. The woman said, "I have a BMW R65 for sale; do you want to buy it?" At the time, I knew nothing about motorcycles. "Yes," I said, "I want to buy it." I purchased the bike and had Will drive it home for me; I had no idea how to operate a motorcycle. A month or so later, after taking some lessons, I started the R65, backed it out of the driveway with much trepidation, and drove it around the block—never exceeding 30 mph. From that moment on, I knew what it meant to have a personal sense of power.

Initially Will was adamantly against the idea of my riding. He claims this had less to do with my being a woman and more to do with the particular woman I am. I am a klutz. Around the house I run into walls, knock my elbows on doorframes, stub my toes on chair legs, bang my knees on table edges, and drop heavy objects on the tops of my feet—all on a regular basis. My body sports no fewer than four or five good-sized bruises at all times. Will naturally assumed I would be an oncoming disaster on a motorcycle. But as it turns out, the instincts needed to ride a motorcycle are not the same as those needed to maneuver safely around the house, and with the exception of U-turns, I'm a pretty good rider. *Better than most guys who ride*, Will now brags.

But I felt uneasy about this trip from the beginning. Coworkers had asked me for documents they might need in case I never returned. Friends who have known me for years had asked me: *Is that a wise thing to do?* Even Will, my bedrock of strength and support, had lapsed into obvious concern a few times before my departure.

We had planned to ride together to the family reunion, but

problems with Will's job changed our plans. He decided he couldn't take the time; instead he would fly up for the weekend. The day before I left, I started complaining about not having enough room on the bike for three weeks' worth of clothes in addition to the extras required: rain suit, tool kit, spare fuses, spare taillight and headlight bulbs, bike cover, first-aid kit, leather jacket, jacket liner, chaps, gauntlet gloves in case it gets cold, lightweight gloves in case it stays hot. I sat in the living room with it spread all around me and dreamed of dumping it all in the back of the car without another thought. Will walked out and popped the hood on the Isuzu. I followed.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Checking the oil."

I turned away and looked at my bike.

"I'm going to take a quick ride."

The sun was barely down and the leftover monsoon clouds gave the sky vast sweeps of pink, lavender, and orange. I turned into Sun City, where wide roads and broad curves provide the perfect short ride. I scanned for golf carts, leaned into the first turn, and let the bike take over. I pulled into the driveway as Will slammed the hood on the Isuzu.

"I checked everything. It's all set," he said as I pulled off my helmet.

"I'm taking my bike."

"I never doubted it for a minute."

The day I left, Will circled the bike, tugging on the straps holding the duffel bag in place. "Make sure you check these every time you stop."

"I will."

"When you stop for the night and reload your gear, make sure you strap to the frame, not to the saddlebags."

"Okay. I took the air pressure gauge out of the car."

"Your tires are fine. Leave 'em alone. You're just going to let the air out of them if you check them all the time."

"I won't."

"Be careful when you go up the drive at the hotel in Flag. It's steep, and there's a sharp turn at the end where you can't see cars coming. Work your clutch and keep your revs up."

"Okay."

"Call me when you get to Flag."

I can count in single digits the times Will has slipped into caretaker mode in our thirteen years of marriage. For this reason I treasured the moment. Our relationship works as a mix of accommodation and recklessness. I think of him as an open-minded, thoughtful, politically liberal man with an undercurrent of Latino machismo and Marine Corps-induced virility. He thinks of me as a tough-minded, opinionated, feminist woman barely coating the inner shell of a quivering, insecure little girl. There are moments when I want to be pulled in by him and given reassurances that he'll take care of things. Out of respect for me, he does not accommodate these moments.

I spend the third morning snaking through alfalfa fields and tiny farm towns on Utah back roads as I make my way north. I find the roads purely through instinct and submerged childhood memories of family car trips. I never make a wrong turn. I stop for gas in Nephi midmorning, then head west to find the old road that will take me to Jericho Junction. As far as I know, the road has never been assigned a road number and is barely maintained. But I'm so close to home I can smell the pot roast, and this road provides the shortest route. Robert Hughes defines riding as an odd mix of aggression and vulnerability, requiring a degree of both abandonment and intense focus. I think about this as I note

the weather damage to the road in the years I've been away. In places there is barely a road at all; I steer through crumbled chunks of pavement. Again I am completely alone in the world. But this time I'm left haunted.

The thought of seeing the Hatch women draws me on. I try to remember any one of them talking to me about what it means to be a woman—about the things women do and the choices they make. I know this never happened. Still, somehow I felt their encouragement to step out, to push myself beyond my fears.

Each of them lived a life different from and similar to the others. Aunt Agatha found joy in the kitchen of her farmhouse while her husband milked the cows and kept her laughing with his stories; Aunt Carrell baked her bread in the kitchen of a sprawling ranch house in an exclusive Denver suburb—the wife of a successful businessman; Aunt Leona looked from her kitchen window to see a city view of her beloved Ogden, Utah, one year, the dark faces of African natives the next year and the Pacific Ocean the next, as she followed her wandering husband around the globe; my mother made tuna sandwiches while listening to a herd of bawling calves and the constant swearing of my father.

They have in common their commitment to the Hatch family and to the Mormon Church, which most times seem one and the same. I hope the commitment to both is voluntary—a choice made with full awareness—but I find it difficult to tell where the legacy ends and the choice begins. Nevertheless the Hatch women have wordlessly given me their blessing to stray from the Mormon Church and the strength to make my own choices. The one thing I do remember their saying is, "Take a backseat to no one." I doubt they meant this literally.

All is familiar—every rut, every curve, every side road—these back roads are seared into my memory. But just after the Eureka turnoff on State Road 36, an unfamiliar sight. Up ahead the road turns to a deep brownish red and stays that way for a good hundred yards. I slow down and keep my eyes on the anomaly; it begins to move. I downshift and crawl toward it. About twenty feet away, I check my mirrors for traffic (although I have not seen a car in over two hours) and stop in the middle of the road. Whatever is in front of me is alive. I cannot turn back; I'm less than fifty miles from home, and any detour would be hundreds of miles. A few renegades have broken from the group and have crawled next to my front wheel. They look a little like crickets, but they are too large—about an inch in diameter—and too red. They are also too strange and ugly to contemplate any longer. I try to pick a path of minimal destruction, hope to hell they don't fly, shift into gear, duck my head behind the windshield, and head home.

I pull into the driveway of my childhood home, stiffly swing one leg over the duffel bag, and gratefully lean the bike onto its side stand. Mom and Dad come out to meet me. Mom hugs my bug-splattered body with tears in her eyes. Dad says to put the bike in the garage before the neighbors see it. I ask Mom about the bugs on the road. Mormon crickets, she tells me. They've returned. They are supposedly the same strain of cricket that almost wiped out the Mormons in the spring of 1848, shortly after they arrived in Utah. After the Mormons tried battling the crickets, to no avail, with fire, water, and brooms, seagulls from the Great Salt Lake swarmed the fields, ate the crickets, and saved the crops.

"We'll pray for gulls later," my father says.

Mom asks if I am going to ride my bike to Cache County to the reunion. No, I say. I'll go with you. I'll sit in the back.

JANA RICHMAN ON "Why I Ride"

This essay began as an earnest attempt to answer the question that was asked of me often: why do I ride a motorcycle. Few people ride and of those who choose to do it, less than 10 percent are women. So what was it that enticed me, and what about my background, my character, let me be totally seduced by riding—an act that, as so many point out, can be a little dangerous.

The unexpected element that emerged in this essay was the realization of the staggering impact the Mormon Church, along with many generations of Mormon women in my family, has had on the formation of who I am, the values and beliefs I hold, the way I think. The success of this essay is that it honestly sets out to discover and disclose, and I think it accomplishes that. The shortcoming of the essay is that the length of this form doesn't allow a deeper exploration. But it sparked a journey to understand what happens when a woman begins to chip away at the foundation of her life. This essay led to a 2,000-mile motorcycle trip following the Mormon Trail in an attempt to understand Mormon history, personal faith, feminism, and breaking from family traditions as well as motorcycling and community among bikers. The journey resulted in a book tentatively titled *In the Shadows of Saints* to be published by Crown in 2005.

In addition to creative nonfiction, I write some fiction and playwriting, but my background is journalism. A creative writing instructor once told me that the journalism training had probably "ruined" me for any kind of "real" writing and I should just stick to journalism. Fortunately, I chose not to believe him. Journalism taught me to care about the details, taught me to ask the right questions, and taught me to recognize and question my own biases.

I don't think creative nonfiction is an emerging genre in American literature; I think it's simply an emerging genre in MFA

programs. Twain and Thoreau were writing in the 1800s what would now be called creative nonfiction; H. L. Mencken, James Thurber, James Baldwin, and others were writing creative nonfiction throughout the 1900s. My favorite creative nonfiction writer, E. B. White, was just finishing up his fifty-year career in 1976, about the time I graduated from high school. Creative nonfiction has a rich history. I see no reason to ignore it and pretend we are breaking new ground with a new kind of literature.

Two pieces of advice have served me well as a writer: the first is to read a lot; the second is to write a lot (and don't assume your creative writing instructors have all the right answers).

Delivering Lily

PHILLIP LOPATE

Ever since expectant fathers were admitted into delivery rooms a few decades ago, they have come armed with video cameras and awe. Before I became a father, I often heard men describe seeing the birth of their baby as "transcendental," the greatest experience in their lives. They would recall how choked up they got, even boast about their tears . . . it sounded very kitschy, like the ultimate sunrise. Being a nontranscendentalist, with suspicions, moreover, about my affective capacities, I was unsure how I would react. I had seen birthing scenes often enough in movies: how much more surprising could the reality be? I wondered, as someone who used to pass out at the sight of my own blood filling syringes, would I prove useless and faint? Or would I rise to the occasion, and be so moved in the bargain that at last I could retire those definitions of myself as a detached skeptic and accept the sweet, decent guy allegedly underneath?

Whatever reactions would befall me, I prepared myself for a

PHILLIP LOPATE's recent books include *Getting Personal: Selected Writings*, *Waterfront: A Journey Around Manhattan*, and *Rudy Burckhardt*.